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# This Female Fights Back: Carol Danvers, Kamala Khan, and Ambivalence Towards Feminism in Ms. Marvel Comics

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In an article published on Marvel.com in 2014, Kelly Sue DeConnick, the writer of the *Captain Marvel* (2012-present), was quoted as saying that she was “struck by how overtly progressive [the 1970s *Ms. Marvel* series] was, even by today’s standards. Sure, it is hokier than today’s comics because that was the style, but it’s not apologetic or furtive about its stance.”<sup>1</sup> By the time this article came to my attention, I had read enough *Ms. Marvel* to disagree with DeConnick. Not only is the series not particularly progressive by today’s standards, it’s not really all that progressive for the 1970s. Certain aspects of the series are consistent with the progressive rhetoric of liberal Second-Wave feminists, but there are also parts of the text that constrain that rhetoric. And, most of the time, the thing that’s progressive is *also* regressive. DeConnick argues that *Ms. Marvel* was “not apologetic or furtive about its stance,” but the series is too ambivalent in its treatment of feminism to really *have* much of a stance.

Any popular text will be ambivalent to some degree because popular texts have multiple audiences. Different audiences are able to read a text in different ways, and some of those end up being contradictory. These varying (and sometimes seemingly-incompatible) readings of the same characteristics of a text are what makes a text ambivalent; “the text [does] not simply [enable] a range of readings and argumentative claim, nor [does] it [merely enable] oppositional reading positions while favoring. . . dominant [viewpoints].” Instead, ambivalent structures are “capable of sustaining incompatible readings and perspectives,” and “[refuse] to adjudicate for or against clear ideological choices.”<sup>2</sup> That is, two contradictory interpretations of a text can be held *and sustained*, meaning that the text itself doesn’t take an outright stance on any kind of ideology.

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<sup>1</sup> Brett White, “Marvel Women of the ‘70s: Ms. Marvel,” *Marvel.com*, Jul. 9, 2014. Accessed Nov. 13, 2015. [http://marvel.com/news/comics/22834/marvel\\_women\\_of\\_the\\_70s\\_ms\\_marvel](http://marvel.com/news/comics/22834/marvel_women_of_the_70s_ms_marvel).

<sup>2</sup> A. Susan Owen, Sarah R. Stein, and Leah R. Vande Berg. *Bad Girls: Cultural Politics and Media Representations of Transgressive Women*. New York: Peter Lang, 2007, 199.

The *Ms. Marvel* series from the 1970s does not, as Kelly Sue DeConnick posits, demonstrate a non-apologetic progressive view towards feminism because it is such an ambivalent text. The series is called *Ms. Marvel*, which identifies it as a potentially feminist text, but whether or not this title is an appropriation of a term is up for debate, since the series is so ambivalent. Ms. Marvel's revealing costume, for example, can be read simultaneously as an expression of sexual liberation and as a symbol of sexual objectification. Similarly, Ms. Carol Danvers (Ms. Marvel's non-powered identity) is a professional woman who isn't afraid to butt heads with her boss, but the artwork of the comics invites the sexual objectification of her as well. Carol Danvers' relationship to Ms. Marvel also represents an ambivalent attitude towards powerful women because Carol doesn't initially know she is Ms. Marvel. She has no control over her transitions between her own identity and her superhero identity, which raises issues of agency and consent, but also suggests that feminism (using superpowers as a metaphor) is something a person doesn't get to choose to believe. The text itself allows simultaneous but contradictory readings of the same events and images.

Take the current run of *Ms. Marvel* (2014-present) as a counterpoint. Despite featuring a lead character with a potentially controversial identity – a sixteen-year-old Muslim girl whose parents are Pakistani immigrants – it is harder to find examples of ambivalence in this series because the series leaves little room for contradicting interpretations. The series contains only a handful of examples of ambivalence, and these are inherent to any series that attracts a broad audience. It is possible to read her parents as stereotypes, and it is possible to read the identification of such a broad audience with Kamala Khan as appropriating the story and identity of a minority, but in multiple facets of Kamala's identity – as a Muslim, as a Pakistani, and as a

millennial – the series shows the multiplicity of her identity, as well as the variations in the ways people with similar identities understand their places in the world.

This paper will compare ambivalence in the *Ms. Marvel* comics from 1977 and those from 2014. The 1970s version represents women and feminism extremely ambivalent. By contrast, the 2014 series is less obviously ambivalent, and the examples of ambivalence that exist are inherent to popular media. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the series shows an attempt to actively push back against ambivalence towards various aspects of Kamala Khan's identity.

### Historiography

When it comes to studying comic books academically, there is a rather unsurprising lack of scholarship. The medium itself was designed to be disposable, cheap, and appealing to children, so it's not really any wonder that academia has only started paying attention to it recently. Furthermore, I haven't found any scholarly sources that are about Ms. Marvel specifically (which, again, doesn't surprise me, since even the most popular superheroes have only recently been subjected to academia). For this reason, the relevant historiography surrounding my topic is, for lack of a better term, literally surrounding it. Some scholarship has been published on superheroines and on feminist themes in comics, but not specifically on the feminist themes in Ms. Marvel.

Mike Madrid's *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* is representative of popular writing (as opposed to scholarly writing) about comic books. It is a basic chronology of the development of female comic book characters since the 1940s, and it does show the progression of different character "types" in relation to the times in which they were written (e.g. the "Sirens and Suffragettes" chapter on heroines from the 1970s<sup>3</sup>).

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<sup>3</sup> Mike Madrid, *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroine* (Minneapolis: Exterminating Angel Press, 2009), 145-181.

He also gives a helpful summary of the character of Ms. Marvel: her origins as a NASA security chief, her powers of flight, and her connection to the liberal feminist rhetoric of the 1970s (though this conversation is woefully brief).<sup>4</sup>

That being said, the book is not the best source from an academic perspective. First, the author doesn't cite any sources, which means that the book doesn't offer a would-be researcher any direct next steps in terms of research. Second, Madrid doesn't talk at all about the industry behind these characters. He touches briefly on the "boys club" that is the comic book industry, but doesn't even bother to tell his readers which characters were published by which labels. For example, it might be useful for a reader to know that both X-Men and Ms. Marvel were published by Marvel comics, so as to understand what kinds of issues publishers were willing to take on at the same time. And finally, for a book about comic book characters, it seems strange that he didn't include any pictures.

I found a review for *The Supergirls* from *PopMatters*, a website that, unsurprisingly, is a website that focuses on pop culture, and appears to be a rather low-brow resource. For example, the reviewer, Jeremy Estes, gives the book ten stars, though it's unclear how many stars were possible (though I assume he's given a book a ten out of ten). Estes points out that Madrid does a good job of covering a lot of ground in his book, and draws connections between the characters and the times in which they were written, but is overall very uncritical of the book.<sup>5</sup>

Conversely, *Persephone Magazine*, which is an online feminist magazine, had a review that was a bit more critical. As the reviewer, Alyson, points out, the book was written by a man, the blurbs on the back of the book are from men, and there were no interviews with anyone from

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<sup>4</sup> Madrid, 176.

<sup>5</sup>Jeremy Estes, "The Supergirls: Fashion Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines by Mike Madrid," *PopMatters*, December 10, 2009. Accessed September 20, 2015. <http://www.popmatters.com/review/117271-the-supergirls-fashion-feminism-fantasy-and-the-history-of-comic-boo/>.

the comics industry (most specifically, no interviews with any women from the industry).<sup>6</sup> But that's not why *The Supergirls* fails to be feminist; there is little discussion of queerness in the book, and includes an instance of "casual transmisogyny," in which Madrid describes a character's reaction to being kissed by She-Hulk as "repulsion, as if he had been smooched by a transvestite."<sup>7</sup>

Where *The Supergirls* is a broad overview of comic book heroines that lacks a lot of detail, Jill Lepore's *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* is the complete opposite. Published in 2014, Lepore's book is, to my knowledge, the cornerstone of the academic study of comic books (written by a woman and about a female character, no less!). The book is a 300 page history of the creation of Wonder Woman and the eccentric character who created her, plus another 90 pages of endnotes. She also includes pictures as visual aids, unlike Madrid. Lepore is a professor of history at Harvard, so really, I would expect nothing less. However, this book is also not quite a model for my thesis, because the focus really is on William Moulton Marston, the creator of Wonder Woman. And there's good reason for that, because as a feminist, bondage enthusiast, and the inventor of the lie detector test<sup>8</sup>, Wonder Woman (a heroine, who ends up getting tied up in literally every issue of early Wonder Woman comics, and who uses a magic lasso to get her enemies to tell the truth) does reflect him as a person. It also just makes for an interesting book.

Again, comparing *The Supergirls* and *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, there was definitely a notable difference in the kinds of reviews I could find. For Madrid's book, all of the reviews I could find were either from online magazines (like *Persephone*) or from blogs.

Lepore's book, however, was reviewed by both NPR Books and The New York Times. NPR's

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<sup>6</sup> Alyson, "Book Review: 'The Superirls' by Mike Madrid," *Persephone Magazine*, January 15, 2015. Accessed September 20, 2015. <http://persephonemagazine.com/2015/01/book-review-supergirls/>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Jill Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 34.

review, written by Etelka Lehoczky, is a kinder review than the one from NYT. Lehoczky relates enough information about Marston to pique anyone's interest in the book, and praises Lepore's "zippy prose" and her use of images.<sup>9</sup> Dwight Garner, the reviewer for NYT, also gives a favorable review, but points out the fact that Marston was a confusing person: "... a huckster, a polyamorist, a serial liar, and a bondage super-enthusiast," but also someone with strong ties to the early feminist movement.<sup>10</sup> As Lepore writes, (as quoted in Garner's review), "It's feminism as fetish."<sup>11</sup> Garner's main argument is that the image being presented to Lepore's readers is a confusing, at times contradictory one, but one that Lepore manages to maneuver fairly well.

Wonder Woman, who is arguably the best-known superheroine of all time, seems to be the main subject of study in the historiography surrounding feminism and comics. Carolyn Cocca, from the State University of New York wrote an article, "Negotiating the Third Wave of Feminism in Wonder Woman," that does exactly what the title suggests. In what ways does Wonder Woman, an "attractive, female, white, heterosexual, middle-to-upper class woman,"<sup>12</sup> embody the ideals of the Third Wave, to which intersecting minority identities are so important? Cocca begins with providing her readers with an overview of what Third Wave feminism is – a group that broke from the Second Wave because they saw the movement as being overly white and heterosexual.<sup>13</sup> She goes on to walk through feminist themes in Wonder Woman chronologically: in the early 2000s, Diana (Wonder Woman) was not "gratuitously sexualized,"

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<sup>9</sup> Etelka Lehoczky, "The Freaky, Fabulous, Feminist 'Secret History' of Wonder Woman," Review of Jill Lepore's *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, *NPR Books*, October 26, 2014. Accessed September 20, 2015. <http://www.npr.org/2014/10/17/356989560/the-freaky-fabulous-feminist-secret-history-of-wonder-woman>

<sup>10</sup> Dwight Garner, "Her Past Unchained," Review of Jill Lepore's *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, in *The New York Times*, October 23, 2014. Accessed September 20, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/24/books/the-secret-history-of-wonder-woman-by-jill-lepore.html?r=0>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Carolyn Cocca, "Negotiating the Third Wave of Feminism in *Wonder Woman*," *American Political Science Association Symposium on the Superhero*, (January 2014), 98.

<sup>13</sup> Cocca, 98.

but given the chance to be “sexually active” with an African-American male love interest.<sup>14</sup> In the late 2000s, the series gained the input of a female writer, Gail Simone, and the storylines directly addressed the line between feminine empowerment in a superheroine’s costume and the consumption of said costumes by the male gaze.<sup>15</sup> In the 2010s, Diana is further desexualized and degendered – she performs both femininity (through her appearance, mainly) and masculinity (through a newfound affinity for violence).<sup>16</sup>

My thesis fills a gap in the historiography I’ve tried to lay out here. In a sense, I’m trying to do what Carolyn Cocca did in her essay about Third Wave themes in *Wonder Woman* – I’m tracking a progression of ideas across time. It just so happens that, rather than tracking the progression of feminist ideas, I’m examining the series’ attitude towards feminism and the ways ambivalence towards feminism and women is expressed in two different series (that happen to share a title). In doing so I will be lending my academic authority to a growing field (the academic study of popular culture), which has, up until recently, been unfairly ignored by mainstream academia.

### **Ambivalence in Authorship**

Carol Danvers, who would go on to be the first Ms. Marvel, was first introduced in 1968 in *Marvel Superheroes #12*. She was the head of security at the Kennedy Space Center, and was put into the series as a love interest for Captain Marvel, an alien-turned superhero named Marvell that Marvel Comics had introduced the year before.<sup>17</sup> In *Captain Marvel #18*, in November 1969, Carol ends up in the middle of a conflict between Captain Marvel and his arch nemesis.

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<sup>14</sup> Cocca, 99.

<sup>15</sup> Cocca, 99.

<sup>16</sup> Cocca, 100.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Wheeler, “Oh Captain, My Captain: How Carol Danvers Became Marvel’s Biggest Female Hero,” *Comics Alliance*, Nov. 10, 2014, accessed Oct. 6, 2015, <http://comicsalliance.com/captain-marvel-carol-danvers-marvel-biggest-female-hero/>.



After an accident that ends with an alien machine exploding and exposing Carol to immense amounts of radiation, she gets powers similar to Mar-vell's – flight, super strength, and a “seventh sense.”<sup>18</sup>

It wasn't for nearly a decade after her first appearance that Carol Danvers was revisited in order to become Ms. Marvel. Gerry Conway, the series creator and the writer and editor of the first two issues, decided that if the character was going to be called Ms. Marvel, she should be tied to another character named Marvel – Captain Marvel. He “remembered a character from the early issues of the *Captain Marvel* book – a security agent at Cape Kennedy named Carol Danvers.”<sup>19</sup> And, since she was a “woman who could become a NASA Security Chief in those pre-Liberation days, [she] *had* to be a woman who'd call herself Ms.”<sup>20</sup> *Ms. Marvel #1* made its debut in January 1977: a “fabulous first issue,” the cover of which declares that, “this female fights back!”<sup>21</sup> As one might expect from the 1970s comic book industry, this series was written, drawn, lettered, and colored by men, and as such, the 1970s run of *Ms. Marvel* was targeted towards a male audience (just like just about every other comic published in the 20<sup>th</sup> century). The fact was, there simply were no women writing superhero comics in the 1970s.

Gerry Conway addressed this issue in the letters section (called “Ms. Prints”) in the back of *Ms. Marvel #1*: “Why is a man writing this book about a woman? Why didn't a woman create Ms. Marvel?”<sup>22</sup> From its inception, *Ms. Marvel* would be an ambivalent text because the creator of the series itself had an ambivalent attitude towards women and feminism. He simultaneously asserts that his comic is intended to be feminist and demonstrates the ways in which he, as part

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<sup>18</sup> Madrid, 176.

<sup>19</sup> Gerry Conway, “Ms. Prints,” (Jan. 1977) Reprinted in *Marvel Masterworks: Ms. Marvel, Vol. 1*, ed. Cory Sedlmeier (New York: Marvel Entertainment Inc., 2014), 252.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Gerry Conway, “Ms. Marvel #1,” (Jan. 1977) reprinted in *Marvel Masterworks: Ms. Marvel, Vol. 1*, ed. Cory Sedlmeier (New York: Marvel Entertainment Inc., 2014), 1.

<sup>22</sup> Conway, “Ms. Prints,” 252.

of the male-dominated comic book industry, does not feel any responsibility to promote feminism in real life. In the following section, I will be using Conway's own reflection on his work (from 2014) and Laura Alcott's criteria for "Speaking for Others" to assess the ambivalence of the ideas Conway lays out in the three reasons he gives as to why he is the one writing *Ms. Marvel*.

1. The first of his reasons is that there are no "qualified women writers working in the super-hero comics field." He emphasizes the fact that there are talented women writers and artists, but that none of them are "trained" specifically in writing superheroes. "There should be," he concedes, "but there aren't."<sup>23</sup>
2. The second reason he gives is "more personal," which is that he, as a man *wants* to write this comic about a woman. "More reason than this, he [doesn't] need."<sup>24</sup>
3. The third reason is, "why not a man? If the women's liberation movement means anything, it's a battle for equality of the sexes. And it's [Conway's] contention that a man, properly motivated and aware of the pitfalls, can write a woman character as well as a woman."<sup>25</sup> He goes on to explain that, as a man who wants to write a female character, he is being treated the same as women who, in years past, were told that they could not write "convincing male adventure stories," even though those women were perfectly able to do so. He concedes that "men haven't written convincing women in the past," but he doesn't see why that should mean that no man can ever write a convincing woman.

All of these reasons are problematic in their own ways. In terms of the first reason he gives, that there were simply no women "qualified" to write *Ms. Marvel*, is one that Conway actually addressed in the 2014 *Marvel Masterworks* volume of *Ms. Marvel* from the 1970s, in

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

which he admits that he is now “embarrassed” by his “brief stint on *Ms. Marvel*,” because he now recognizes the “insensitivity and clueless arrogance of [his] assumption that [he] was ‘qualified’ to create a super-heroine” while, at the same time, he “claimed there were no female writers ‘qualified’ to write a superhero.”<sup>26</sup>

The problem, of course, wasn’t that there were no women with the talent to write *Ms. Marvel*, but that the comic book industry was such a male-dominated industry. As Conway concedes in the introduction he wrote to the 2014 reprint of 1970s *Ms. Marvel*:

super-hero comics in the 1970s (and honestly, before and since) were something of a boy’s club. We lived in a kind of psychic treehouse, isolated from the larger world, enjoying the things we enjoyed, and with little or no awareness that we’d created a series of institutional impediments to keep access to the treehouse limited to those who shared our interests, and, predictably, our gender...we were a boy’s club. No girls need apply. We had our toys and they were our toys and we didn’t want to share.<sup>27</sup>

It wasn’t that women weren’t *allowed* to write superhero comics, or even that the comic book industry was intentionally excluding them. It was simply that the institutions within the comic book industry weren’t interested in hiring female writers or fostering female interest in superhero comics. This “boy’s club” industry sought to capitalize on the Second-Wave movement as it seeped into popular culture. And, since comic books were such a boy-oriented endeavor, “despite the title, *Ms. Marvel* was obviously a boy-oriented super-heroine.”<sup>28</sup> Conway ends up calling *Ms. Marvel* “the ultimate male fantasy ‘feminist’ superheroine of the 1970s.”<sup>29</sup>

Though it may seem difficult to find fault with Conway’s second reason for writing *Ms. Marvel*, that he simply wanted to write the series, there is an issue, which Linda Alcoff, a professor of philosophy at that City College of New York, refers to as “The Problem with

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<sup>26</sup> Gerry Conway, “Welcome to the Treehouse,” In *Marvel Masterworks Presents: Ms. Marvel Vol. 1*, (New York: Marvel Entertainment, 2014), vii.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Conway, “Welcome to the Treehouse,” viii.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Speaking for Others.”<sup>30</sup> This refers to instances in which a person in a position of power – in this case, a male comic book writer – speaks on behalf of a person in a subjugated position – in this case, American women. There is, of course, a time and a place for allyship; in this case, Gerry Conway, as a man in a male-dominated industry is attempting to be an ally to the feminist movement. But, according to Alcoff, in order to truly speak as an ally, there are four things a person has to do, and, in 1977, Conway failed to do any of them.

The first of Alcoff’s criteria is the requirement that the speaker must first analyze the reason behind their desire to speak. The impetus to speak, and to “teach rather than listen to a less-privileged speaker” is, according to Alcoff, an embodiment of “a desire for mastery and domination” over a disadvantaged group.<sup>31</sup> If a speaker’s reason for speaking rather than listening comes from a desire for domination, the speaker should not be the one speaking. Conway defends his impetus to speak, but does so only by saying that his own interest in a superheroine is legitimate, and that he is qualified to write one. He does not seem to recognize that, by defending his apparent need to write *Ms. Marvel*, he is reinforcing his own position of power over a disadvantaged group – in this case, female comic book writers.

The speaker must also be aware of where they stand in relation to the topic they are discussing.”<sup>32</sup> This involves discussion with others, so that “aspects of our location less highlighted in our own minds might be revealed to us.” This is not accomplished by speakers “[offering] up... autobiographical information” as a disclaimer, because it does nothing to interrogate one’s location and forces the audience to do all the work of figuring out the context from which the speaker is speaking.”<sup>33</sup> These “apologetics for any limitations of his speech” may

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<sup>30</sup> Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 20 (1991): 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

serve to make the speaker “feel even more authorized to speak and be accorded more authority by his peers.”<sup>34</sup> Conway recognizes that, as a white male comic book writer, he will not be writing from his own personal experiences, but aside from that, he does nothing to discuss his own identity in relation to what it is he’s writing.

Alcoff also posits that speakers need to hold themselves accountable and responsible for what they say. This means that the speaker needs to make “a serious and sincere commitment to remain open to criticism... A quick impulse to reject criticism must make one wary.”<sup>35</sup>

Conway’s third reason, “why not a man?” is essentially a preemptive rejection of criticism. It seems now like a blatant twisting of liberal feminist rhetoric from the Second Wave.<sup>36</sup> It’s true that the goal of the mainstream Second Wave was to achieve “equality between the sexes,” but by inserting himself into this equation, he is using feminist rhetoric for his own gain. That is, a movement that was about putting women and men (since that was the Second Wave understanding of “the sexes”) on equal footing with one another, with a specific emphasis on the workforce, was supposed to be about opening opportunities for women in the professional, male-dominated sphere. It should have been about building a ladder up to the boys’ treehouse and attempting to deconstruct the institutions that prevent women from writing superhero comics.

Speakers must also be aware of the potential real-world effects of what they say. One must “analyze the probable or actual effects of the words on the discursive and material context.”<sup>37</sup> Conway seems unconcerned that, in writing a male-oriented “feminist” comic book,

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>36</sup> The purpose of feminism, according to mainstream liberal feminist groups like NOW, the purpose of feminism is to “to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly **equal partnership with men.**” (Emphasis mine.) (From “The National Organization for Women’s 1966 Statement of Purpose,” *National Organization for Women* (1966), Accessed Dec. 15, 2015, <http://now.org/about/history/statement-of-purpose/>.)

<sup>37</sup> Alcoff, 26.

he is upholding the existing hierarchy in the comic book industry, and keeping women out of what he would later refer to as a “boys club.”

The fact is, Conway is making no attempt to actually challenge the hierarchy that benefits him; he recognizes that “there should be” women writing superhero comics, but fails to really interrogate why there aren’t. He also fails to question *why* he wants to write this comic with no input or work from women included in it. As the editor-in-chief of Marvel Comics, it seems like he could have thrown a ladder down from the “boys-only treehouse” to a female writer or artist if he’d wanted to.

Conway’s insistence that he’s allowed to write this series because he should be able to be equal to women comes down to an ambivalent reading of “equality between the sexes.” By claiming to be the right person to write a “feminist” superhero comic, while also asserting that no women are “qualified” to write superheroes, he’s upholding and maintaining the status quo:

comic books are for boys and should be written by boys, even if that comic is capitalizing on the parts of the Second Wave movement that bled into popular culture. The comic book industry (and the writing industry more generally, to use his example of women writing adventure stories about men) has always been a male-dominated one, and by keeping himself in the position of power as the writer and editor of a comic book that is



Figure 1: MM#1 (Jan. 1977), Cover

supposedly “feminist,” Conway is doing nothing to promote feminism in real life within his own workplace and the industry more generally, which shows his own ambivalence as a content-creator. With this attitude as a starting point, the ambivalence that follows in the rest of the comics is unsurprising.

### Appearance

Since comic books are a visual medium, the first ambivalent characteristic of *Ms. Marvel* an audience will likely notice is Ms. Marvel’s appearance. Take the cover of *Ms. Marvel #1*, for example. A few things stand out right away – Ms. Marvel is a conventionally attractive, blonde, white, thin woman who is simultaneously in a power stance (her fist in the air) and wearing a costume that draws a lot of attention to her legs and her midriff.<sup>38</sup> The ambivalence in her appearance is most obvious in her costume, which can be read as either a symbol of sexual liberation or as an example of the Male Gaze dampening the power of a female superhero.

The first interpretation of her costume, that of liberation, makes sense when considered in its historical context. This comic came out in 1977, during the Women’s Liberation movement. For many feminists, clothing was a way to show that they were eschewing the patriarchal expectation that they conceal their sexualities. This is only about a decade after miniskirts and bikinis came into popularity, which were symbolic of feminism in some circles.<sup>39</sup> There was an idea that there was power in one’s appearance and clothing.<sup>40</sup>

The comic itself supports this reading, because for

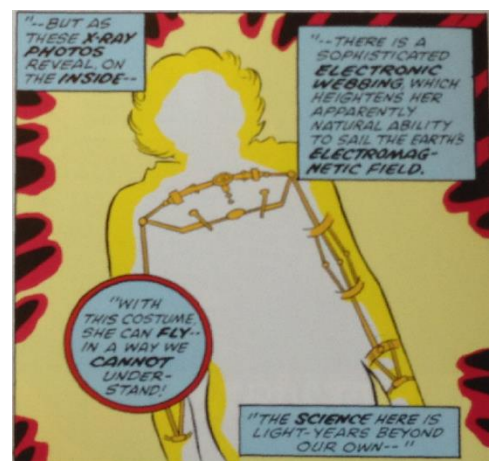


Figure 2: MM#2 (Feb. 1977), 20.

<sup>38</sup> MM#1, 1.

<sup>39</sup> James Laver, *Costume and Fashion: A Concise History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 261.

<sup>40</sup> Women’s workwear during the Second-Wave was also a visual indicator of their equality to men – think of the giant shoulder pads of the 1980s. Women’s suits were designed to give women a more masculine appearance.

the first six issues, Ms. Marvel's powers come from her costume itself. The specifics of how it works are unclear [see image], but the important part is the line that follows: "With this costume, she can fly – in a way we cannot understand."<sup>41</sup> Wearing this costume gives her power, and observers don't know why; it's a secret that she gets to keep to herself.

On the other hand, Ms. Marvel's costume can be read as a symptom of the Male Gaze. The term "male gaze" was coined by Laura Mulvey, a feminist film theorist, in 1975. Her argument finds its basis in Freudian psychoanalysis of film, but aspects of it can be applied to comics as well. Basically, her argument is that women in films are portrayed as passive objects, which are there to be viewed for the pleasure of a male viewer.<sup>42</sup> In the case *Ms. Marvel*, one needs only to consider the idea that there is no narrative-based reason for Ms. Marvel to have her navel<sup>43</sup> and legs bared, and that the writers, artists, and target audience of this series were all heterosexual men.

Ms. Marvel's hyper-feminine appearance also plays into the male gaze. As previously stated, she is a conventionally attractive (read: white, thin, blonde) woman, which serves to dampen whatever sort of "Otherness" might be presented by a woman with superpowers, as well as keep female readers/viewers from identifying with her too much. "The function of femininity... is to provide cover for the female's Otherness and to distance the female spectator from finding fullness in self-identification."<sup>44</sup>

The comics' treatment of Ms. Marvel's costume is ambivalent because the comics invite both of these readings of the simultaneously. One reader may interpret her costume as a symbol

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<sup>41</sup> Gerry Conway, "Ms. Marvel #2," (Feb. 1977) reprinted in *Marvel Masterworks: Ms. Marvel, Vol. 1*, ed. Cory Sedlmeier (New York: Marvel Entertainment Inc., 2014), 20.

<sup>42</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 Autumn (1975): 6-18.

<sup>43</sup> It isn't until issue #9 (Sept. 1977) that her costume is changed to cover her midsection.

<sup>44</sup> Lauren Rabinovitz, "Ms. Representation: The Politics of Feminist Sitcoms." in *Television, History, and American Culture: Feminist Critical Essays*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 149.



of liberation, while another may read it as a symbol of the male gaze. And these readings are contradictory, because an article of clothing shouldn't be able to be both empowering and objectifying, but both readings have their basis in the text itself.

### **Feminist Rhetoric**

*Ms. Marvel* does include a smattering of liberal feminist rhetoric. First and most obviously, the title itself indicates that to a potential reader; up until the 1970s "Ms." was not widely used, and it was Second Wave feminists who first started embracing the title. There are also instances in which Carol Danvers establishes herself as a feminist in her workplace, typically while butting heads with her misogynist boss. Including feminist rhetoric does signify some kind of feminist potential, but the instances in which that rhetoric is used and the images that accompany these moments often dampen its impact and open a level of ambivalence.

For *Ms. Marvel* to be called "Ms.," and for Carol Danvers to insist that she is "*Ms. Carol Danvers*"<sup>45</sup> while working at the *Daily Bugle* is a feminist move on the part of the writers. As a superhero, Carol is identified as a woman without having to be "Marvel Girl" (as most female superheroes up until the 1970s, with the notable exception of Wonder Woman, had "girl" in their names<sup>46</sup>). As a person living a professional life, Carol's use of "Ms." is an assertion of her own independence – her marital status as a person doesn't matter – and it identifies her as a feminist to the reader. Although the term didn't start out as anything more than an attempt to make it easier to address women, in the 1970s, "Ms." was very much a feminist endeavor, and it wasn't accepted as a legitimate title until the 1980s.

For those of us living in a post-Second Wave America, it's difficult to understand the power that came with the title of "Ms." The options prior to the acceptance of "Ms." were based

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<sup>45</sup> MM#1, 5.

<sup>46</sup> Madrid, 176.

on a woman's relationship to a man; she was either unmarried, and therefore a "Miss Father's Name," or she was married, and was a "Mrs. Husband's Name." Her title, which would be used in public life, relayed information about her personal life to everyone she met. "Ms.," on the other hand, was an option that, like "Mr.," did not attach a person's marital status to their public status.

"Ms." came into prominence as a title for unmarried women during the Second Wave movement, but its roots go back farther than that. According to Ben Zimmer, an editor at Oxford university press and a consultant to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term first appeared in an article in *The Sunday Republican*, a newspaper from Springfield Massachusetts, in November, 1901.<sup>47</sup> The article was written anonymously by someone who believed that there was "a void in the English language"<sup>48</sup> that needed to be filled. The solution was word that would help people avoid the "embarrassing position"<sup>49</sup> of misaddressing a woman whose status is unknown. As the writer observes, "to call a maiden Mrs. is only a shade worse than to insult a matron with the inferior title Miss."<sup>50</sup> The solution? "Ms.," a title that can apply to any woman, regardless of her marital status.

Until the 1970s, however, "Ms." wasn't especially popular. In the 1950s, it was sometimes used by employers to refer to secretaries without having to "[debate] between Miss and Mrs."<sup>51</sup> It wasn't a feminist issue – it was a business practice intended to save time.

It became a feminist term when, in 1961, Sheila Michaels read what she believed to be a typo on a piece of mail addressed to her roommate. Rather than "Miss Mary Hamilton," her

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<sup>47</sup> Ben Zimmer, "Ms.," *The New York Times*, Oct. 3, 2009. Accessed Oct. 10, 2015.  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/25/magazine/25FOB-onlanguage-t.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/25/magazine/25FOB-onlanguage-t.html?_r=0)

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

roommate's name was written as "Ms. Mary Hamilton."<sup>52</sup> "It resolved a dilemma for me," Michaels wrote in 2008. "having been born as a bastard who "belonged" to no man."<sup>53</sup> That is, since Michaels was in her late twenties, unmarried, and hadn't been raised by her father, "Miss" And Mrs." were both titles that didn't quite fit her because both defined a woman in terms of her relationship to a man.

For the next decade, Michaels advocated for the widespread use of "Ms.," but it didn't catch on until Gloria Steinem heard about it. Michaels recalls that, "it finally became current when a friend of Gloria Steinem heard me, filling a lull during a WBAI interview with 'The Feminists.' ... It would still be a dead item if Steinem's friend hadn't suggested it as the name of the experimental feminist magazine supplement."<sup>54</sup>

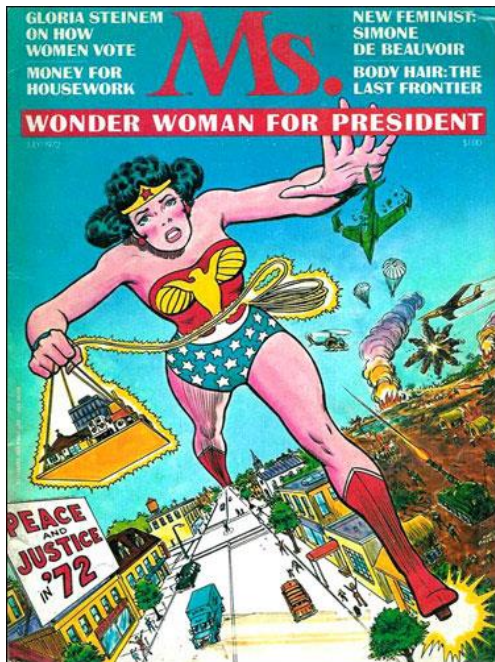


Figure 3: *Ms.* (July, 1972).

Gloria Steinem's magazine, *Ms.*, the "experimental magazine supplement" to which Michaels is referring, was launched in December 1971 "as a 'one-shot' sample insert in *New York Magazine*."<sup>55</sup> The first regular issue was released in July 1972.<sup>56</sup> Even though news anchor Harry Reasoner was quoted as saying that the magazine would fail after six months because "they [would] run out of things to say," *Ms.* ended up being a success, and not coincidentally, the title "Ms." came into the mainstream.

A surprising number of parallels exist between Carol Danvers and Gloria Steinem. Steinem was a journalist who

<sup>52</sup> Sheila Michaels, "Forty Years of Defying the Odds," *Solidarity*. 2008. Accessed Oct. 22, 2015. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/1399>.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> "HerStory: 1971 – Present," *Ms. Magazine*, accessed Oct. 22, 2015. <http://www.msmagazine.com/about.asp>.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

spearheaded an overtly feminist magazine, as opposed to Danvers, who was assigned to a woman's magazine and refused to make it about diets and fashion.<sup>57</sup> Yet both magazines were sub-projects to larger, established publications. *Ms.* started as an experimental supplement to *New York Magazine*, and *Woman* is affiliated with *The Daily Bugle* newspaper. Then there's the titles of the magazines – *Woman* is *Ms. Marvel*'s answer to *Ms.* And sure, *Woman* isn't quite as nuanced as a title as *Ms.*, but the title of the comic seems to make up for that. Perhaps the most interesting similarity, however, is that both *Woman* and *Ms.* had superheroines on the covers of their first issues. The contexts are, of course, different; *Woman* exists in a world in which superheroes exist, and so *Ms. Marvel*'s appearance on the cover was a companion to the article Carol Danvers wrote about her. *Ms.*'s premier issue from 1972 proclaimed "Wonder Woman for President" and featured an image of a giant Wonder Woman running down a street away from what is apparently the Vietnam War, carrying a city block suspended in her lasso, holding it the same way that Justice holds her scales. In either case, having a female superhero on the cover of a women's magazine is a visual linking of superpowers and feminism.

Despite *Ms. Magazine* and *Ms. Marvel*, however, "Ms." was not immediately accepted into the American vernacular. Even *The New York Times*, which is generally regarded as having a moderately liberal slant, waited until 1984 to grudgingly accept the term as a correct form of address. During 1984, Geraldine Ferraro ran to be the Democratic Vice Presidential candidate (the first woman to do so). The controversy was her surname – she was married, but went by her maiden name. The candidate used the name Mrs. Ferraro, since she wanted her status as a married woman to be known, but, as William Safire, who was writing for *The New York Times* during the primary, noted, this was not an accurate title to be using:

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<sup>57</sup> MM #1, 5.

...she is not Mrs. Ferraro. Her mother is Mrs. Ferraro. The Democratic candidate is the former Miss Ferraro, who is now Mrs. John Zaccaro, and who can also be described as Mrs. Geraldine Zaccaro or Mrs. Geraldine Ferraro Zaccaro. She has her choice of being known as Miss Ferraro or Mrs. Zaccaro, but not - to my way of thinking - as "Mrs." Ferraro, a person she is not.<sup>59</sup>

The solution to this confusion would be to call Geraldine Ferraro "Ms. Ferraro," but the press generally avoided using the title because "it seem[ed] like propaganda for the women's movement" and "because it conveys less information than Miss... or Mrs."<sup>60</sup> Safire does not contest either of these arguments. In fact, he admits that it "breaks [his] heart to suggest" that "the time has come for Ms.,"<sup>61</sup> but nonetheless, he asserts that the term is necessary, both to respect women's status in the public sphere (regardless of their marital status), but also to preserve the integrity of journalistic factuality. "It is unacceptable for journalists to dictate to a candidate that she call herself Miss or else use her married name; it is equally unacceptable for a candidate to demand that newspapers print a blatant inaccuracy by applying a married honorific to a maiden name."<sup>62</sup> By accepting the third option, journalists are saying, "This is what she styles herself, and you will have to find out elsewhere if she is married or if she started out in life with this name."<sup>63</sup>

Identifying Carol Danvers as a Ms. meant connecting her not only to the feminist movement, but as a feminist who takes her public life – in this case her career – seriously. She isn't a demigod like Wonder Woman or a mutant like Storm from Marvel's *X-Men* – Carol is, first and foremost, a career-woman. Her experiences as a woman in the workplace are as much a part of the comics' storylines as her superhero antics.

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<sup>59</sup> William Safire, "On Language; Goodbye Sex, Hello Gender," *The New York Times*, August 5, 1984. Accessed Oct. 22, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/08/05/magazine/on-language-goodbye-sex-hello-gender.html?pagewanted=1>.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

In the first issue, the first time the reader sees Carol out of costume (that is, not as Ms. Marvel) is when she's getting hired at *The Daily Bugle* as an editor of a new woman's magazine called *Woman*. The editor-in-chief, J. Jonah Jameson, is explaining that, with his responsibilities to the *Bugle*, he's ended up neglecting the magazine department. The women's magazines have, as a result of his neglect, been publishing "articles on Women's Lib, interviews with Kate Millet, [and] stories about careers for women,"<sup>64</sup> as opposed to "useful" articles – about diets, fashion, recipes, and, for *Woman*'s premier issue, and expose of Ms. Marvel. Carol doesn't take Jameson's disdain for feminism all that seriously, and pushes straight on to what's actually important to her – her salary [see image]. Jameson offers twenty grand, but Carol demands thirty: and she continues to demand thirty grand until Jameson exclaims, "Blast it! How can I argue money with a *woman*?"<sup>65</sup> and agrees to her terms. This isn't exactly the most feminist ending this argument could have had, but workplace equality was one of the major tenants of the Second Wave, and Carol stands her ground in the place of an aggressive boss and demands the pay she knows she deserves as a magazine editor.

This would not be the only time Carol and her boss butted heads; in issue six, after the first issue of *Woman* is released, Jameson (who hates all superheroes) is furious to find out that Carol has put a favorable story about Ms. Marvel on the cover, but again, Carol stands her ground. When Jameson storms into her office and threatens to fire her, Carol fires back: "According to [the circulation polls] *Woman* is the hottest magazine to hit New York in *ten years*. In short, it is a rip-roaring, fire-eating, *money making success* – because *I made it*

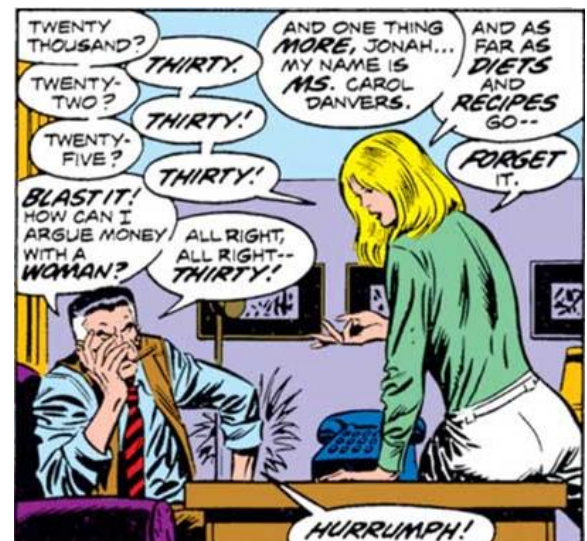


Figure 4: MM#1 (Jan. 1977), 5.

<sup>64</sup> MM #1, 5.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

one!”<sup>66</sup> Carol is consistently portrayed as a strong, confident person who knows her value.

On the other hand there is an element of Carol’s feminism that reads as what Jill Lepore refers to as “feminism as fetish.”<sup>67</sup> That is to say, feminist rhetoric is being appropriated in order to sell comic books to a largely male audience. Consider the image above, in which Carol is arguing her salary with Jameson. She’s asserting herself, and she’s drawn in such a way that she’s bigger than Jameson – a classic way to illustrate a power dynamic; the person in power in a given situation appears larger and higher up than the other. And yet, despite the image inviting its viewer to read Carol Danvers as a strong and assertive person, the fact that she’s drawn with her back to the viewer is also inviting the viewer to look at her butt.<sup>68</sup> This is ambivalence in an image; it simultaneously encourages the reader to see Carol Danvers as an active subject who will negotiate her pay and clearly state what her boss can expect from her, but it also positions Carol in such a way that the viewer can objectify her.

### **Superpowers and Agency**

Carol Danvers’ relationship to Ms. Marvel and superheroism is perhaps one of the most ambivalent characteristics of the series. Ms. Marvel has superpowers – Carol doesn’t. And, initially, it isn’t Ms. Marvel who has the powers – it’s her costume. Until a pseudoscientific explosion fuses the powers of her suit into Ms. Marvel’s anatomy, there’s nothing intrinsically superpowered about her. It’s also important to note that Ms. Marvel and Carol Danvers are two completely different people. And, for the first three issues, Ms. Marvel and Carol Danvers don’t even know that they are each other because Carol Danvers has no control over when she changes into Ms. Marvel. There are feminist possibilities presented by the superhero narrative as a

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<sup>66</sup> Chris Claremont, “Ms. Marvel #6,” (June 1977) reprinted in *Marvel Masterworks: Ms. Marvel, Vol. 1*, ed. Cory Sedlmeier (New York: Marvel Entertainment Inc., 2014), 93.

<sup>67</sup> Lepore, 236.

<sup>68</sup> Shout out to the student in GQS 201 who pointed this out.

possible metaphor for feminism, but some of those same characteristics may also invite a non-feminist reading.

As previously mentioned, Ms. Marvel's powers of flight come from her costume, and are eventually transferred directly to her body, but she also has the power of her seventh sense. And it's never specified what her sixth sense is, but the seventh sense is a kind of power of premonition. That is, she can sense when something is about to happen, like when an enemy is about to shoot at her from behind. Some readers might interpret this as a sort of feminine intuition.

In order to access either of these powers, Carol Danvers has to be Ms. Marvel, as the two names are two completely different people. For the first seven issues, Carol experiences blackouts, during which time, Ms. Marvel inhabits her body. Until the end of MM#3, Carol has no memories of these blackouts and doesn't even know that she is Ms. Marvel.<sup>69</sup> There's a definite involuntary aspect to her powers; Carol doesn't get to decide when she turns into Ms. Marvel, and Ms. Marvel doesn't get to decide when she turns back into Carol. Since bodily autonomy was (and is) such a cornerstone of feminist rhetoric, this disregard for Carol's agency does represent a constraint on a potentially feminist narrative.

At the same time, a potentially feminist narrative could also underlie this. If Carol's powers are a metaphor for feminism, then her inability to understand or truly utilize her powers may be a metaphor for the experience of a woman who doesn't get to decide whether or not feminism is empowering for her. Take the panel below, in which Mike, Carol's shrink/love interest, suggests that if being Ms. Marvel is causing her, Carol Danvers, so much trouble, then she should stop being Ms. Marvel. Carol is taken aback, and says, "I--I don't want to. I'm not

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<sup>69</sup> Chris Claremont, "Ms. Marvel #3," (March 1977) reprinted in *Marvel Masterworks: Ms. Marvel, Vol. 1*, ed. Cory Sedlmeier (New York: Marvel Entertainment Inc., 2014), 53.



even sure I can.”<sup>70</sup> It’s important to note that, even though she’s under pressure to respond quickly (as evidenced by her stutter), Carol still leads with “I don’t *want* to,” and not “I’m not sure I *can*.” This suggests that she does have enough agency over her situation to make the decision to continue to be Ms. Marvel.

The treatment of Carol Danvers in relation to Ms. Marvel suggests ambivalence within a feminist reading of the comics. From a feminist standpoint, the issues of non-agency and non-choice in the first several issues are problematic. But again, also from a feminist perspective, the progression Carol experiences (from not remembering her blackouts to being able to control her transitions) could be read as one of enlightenment, which ends in her making the choice to be a superhero. Both readings are suggested by the text, despite seeming to contradict each other.



Figure 5: MM#5 (May 1977), 74.

### The Rape of Ms. Marvel

Perhaps the greatest insult to whatever feminist themes are present in *Ms. Marvel* is the way she is written out of the *Avengers* series in *Avengers* #200, in which she has a baby with one of the Avengers’ enemies. As the official Marvel summary puts it,

<sup>70</sup> Chris Claremont, “Ms. Marvel #5,” (May 1977), reprinted in *Marvel Masterworks: Ms. Marvel, Vol. 1*, ed. Cory Sedlmeier (New York: Marvel Entertainment Inc., 2014), 74.

Ms. Marvel undergoes a nine-month gestation period in the span of a few days, completely unaware as to how she got pregnant. She gives birth to a baby boy, which grows to a full adult in hours ... Marcus [her child] explains himself and reveals that he is the son of Immortus [a long-standing enemy of the Avengers] and used Ms. Marvel in an attempt to free himself from Limbo. However, [once] his gambit has failed... he must return to Limbo. Ms. Marvel, feeling a strong bond between herself and Marcus, joins him in Limbo.<sup>71</sup>

Ms. Marvel, who shows up in *Avengers* #199, only one issue before being written out of the series as a whole, finds herself pregnant without knowing how, gives birth to a child who quickly grows into a man with close ties to one of their enemies, and Carol decides to go home with him. And that's not even the most problematic part.



Figure 6: *Avengers* #200 (Oct. 1980).

The official Marvel summary of the comic fails to include a few vital details. Marcus, her child, “uses Ms. Marvel in an attempt to free himself from Limbo,”<sup>72</sup> but that’s not the half of it. He frees himself from Limbo by bringing Ms. Marvel to Limbo so that he can use her *uterus* in order to be reborn on Earth. He picks her because she’s part Kree (alien), and with her “combination of Kree and human strengths, would be the perfect vessel.”<sup>73</sup> He fails to win her over through romantic means,<sup>74</sup> so he

<sup>71</sup> “Avengers Vol. 1 #200: ‘The Child is Father To...?’,” *Marvel Database*, accessed Nov. 13, 2015. [http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/Avengers\\_Vol\\_1\\_200](http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/Avengers_Vol_1_200).

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> “Avengers #200: The Child is Father To...” qtd in Carol A. Strickland, “The Rape of Ms. Marvel,” originally in *LoC* #1, Jan. 1980. Accessed Nov 8, 2015. <http://carolastrickland.com/comics/msmarvel/index.html>.

<sup>74</sup> With “poetry, clothes and music he furnished, thinking that those are the only things women are interested in.” (Strickland.)

decides to give Ms. Marvel “a subtle boost from Immortus’ machines”<sup>75</sup> to not just force her to change her mind and get her to sleep with him, but to wipe her memory and keep her from remembering the whole affair. Mind control in order to get Ms. Marvel to have sex with him so that he can impregnate her with himself? There’s a reason that Carol A. Strickland, a comics enthusiast and feminist, who was writing for *LoC Magazine* in 1980, aptly renamed this storyline “The Rape of Ms. Marvel.”<sup>76</sup>

Though Carol is initially upset at the way that her fellow Avengers have been too busy cooing over her rapidly-growing child to care that she has no idea where the child came from [see image], she eventually agrees to meet him. By this point, Marcus is a grown man with an uncomfortably “Oedipal way of speaking.”<sup>77</sup> As Strickland notes, “of all the times Marcus refers to her directly, it is as “Carol” three times, “my love” once, and “mother” three times.”<sup>78</sup> Marcus explains to the Avengers who he is, where he came from, and that his plan had failed. After listening to him speak, “with a glister in her eye and sob in her heart, [Carol] tenderly strokes the rapist’s cheek and tells him that she will return with him to his home.”<sup>79</sup> As Strickland puts it, this is “a fitting end to this male fantasy. A desirable woman/mother figure is raped and then chooses to be the lover of her rapist/son. Raping is manly. Women love to be raped. Perversion is wonderful for kids and other people of taste to read.”<sup>80</sup>

This issue, unsurprisingly, was not entirely well received, and as a result, the writers addressed how badly Ms. Marvel had been treated. In *Avengers Annual #10* (under the leadership of a different writer than *Avengers #200*), released the following year, Spider-Woman rescues

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<sup>75</sup> “Avengers,” qtd. in Strickland

<sup>76</sup> Strickland.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

Ms. Marvel from Limbo and brings her to Charles Xavier's (leader of the X-Men) home to recover. In what Strickland calls an "extremely pleasant surprise," Carol Danvers is furious with the Avengers for doing nothing to stop Marcus from taking her back to Limbo. She hadn't wanted to go – Marcus had used mind control again, and forced her into it. As Strickland notes, "the word 'rape' is never used, [but] the story did concentrate on "that 'subtle boost from Immortus' machines' line to heavily imply it."<sup>81</sup> To Marvel's credit, they didn't simply retcon the



Figure 7: *Avengers Annual #10* (Aug. 1981).

problems created by *Avengers #200*, but rather addressed the fact that Carol Danvers' autonomy had been taken advantage of, and that her friends hadn't questioned any of it. That being said, there is still ambivalence towards this storyline because it existed in the first place.

The 1970s *Ms. Marvel* comic was very much a product of its time, but it was not, as

Kelly Sue DeConnick posited in 2014, a particularly feminist product, even for its time. *Ms. Marvel* was a fetishized pinup, whose goal, as stated by the first writer of the comic, was to entice boys to buy comic books. Every feminist possibility is almost immediately constrained by the male gaze.

### Kamala Khan

It wasn't until Kamala Khan took up the mantle of *Ms. Marvel* in 2014 that the series did away with the ambivalence that characterized the 1977 run of the comics. Instead of the sexualized Carol Danvers, audiences were introduced to Kamala, a sixteen year old Pakistani Muslim from New Jersey who writes *Avengers* fanfiction and is trying to figure out how to

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<sup>81</sup> Strickland, "The Aftermath"



balance her family life with her social life. Kamala is very much a figure of the mainstream Third-Wave feminist movement, which focuses on the intersections of one's identity. Kamala's identity is made up of intersecting facets that could be read as potentially controversial if not written respectfully –she has immigrant parents and she's a practicing Muslim. But unlike series that featured Carol Danvers, the 21<sup>st</sup> century *Ms. Marvel* navigates a nuanced character without inviting ambivalence by showing the ways in which Kamala's identity relates and intersects with the facets she shares with the people around her.

### Origin and Creator

G. Willow Wilson is the current writer of *Ms. Marvel*. She is a white American who converted to Islam as a young adult after exploring different forms of monotheism in college. As she explained in a 2014 interview with IslamSciFi.com, when she was considering converting to Islam, she knew very little about the religion in a social or worldly context.

I was approaching Islam through a purely textual route. I really didn't know any Muslims at the time. I had never been to a Muslim country; I had never been inside a mosque. I didn't know any sort of contemporary issues. I knew that I had a sense and I watched the news; I saw women in Burkas and those kinds of things, but that was— my knowledge was pretty cosmetic when it came to gender relationships within Islam. I thought, well okay I'll go into it with an open mind and I'll see... I got a job in Egypt to teach; moved there a couple of months after graduating college. It's because I wanted to kind of see first-hand, what the situation was, and what it was like for women in a Muslim country, and come to my own decision that way.<sup>82</sup>

Wilson's identity as a Muslim convert gives her a different perspective on Islam than most people, which lends itself well to writing a well-developed Muslim character for a mainstream audience. On the one hand, she came to Islam as an outsider. She was raised in a nonreligious

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<sup>82</sup> G. Willow Wilson, interview by Rebecca Hankins, *IslamSciFi.com*, March 25, 2015. Accessed Nov. 19, 2015. <http://www.islamscifi.com/islam-sci-fi-interview-of-g-willow-wilson-part-i/>.

household and started exploring religion as an adult.<sup>83</sup> As illustrated in the quote above, she took an interest first in Muslim texts, and then started to learn what Islam was like as a lived religion. What this suggests is that, since all of Wilson's knowledge of Islam was developed as an adult, she is conscious of an outsider's perspective on the religion in a way that a person who was raised Muslim might not be. At the same time, since Wilson does practice Islam, she is well-versed in the religion and able to write a Muslim character in a way that a non-Muslim wouldn't be able to. But, as Wilson notes, "being a Muslim is really only one part of [Kamala's] overall arc, her overall journey."<sup>84</sup>

Her identity is nuanced and multi-faceted, and the comics don't shy away from allowing her to find strength in every facet of her identity. It is both this multi-faceted characterization of Kamala, but also the illustration of how she relates to those multiple identities that shows the ways in which *Ms. Marvel* pushes back against ambivalence.

### **Family and culture**

So much of Kamala's story has to do with the way that her identity fits into a larger understanding of American society. She is the daughter of immigrants who came to America from Karachi, Pakistan, but she is also a very American teenage girl. She wants to fit in with her peers, but has to balance that with not upsetting her family. The first few issues of *Ms. Marvel* grapple with Kamala figuring out how to be herself – both as a teenager and as a superhero.

In the first issue, she is invited to a party by some of her classmates, but her parents won't let her go. She sneaks out that night and goes anyway, because she wants to be "normal."<sup>85</sup> When she gets there, the classmates who invited her give her a drink. They laugh at her when she spits

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> G. Willow Wilson, interview by Abraham Riesman, *Vulture*, March 20, 2014, accessed Nov 19, 2015. <http://www.vulture.com/2014/03/g-willow-wilson-ms-marvel-kamala-khan-interview.html>.

<sup>85</sup> G. Willow Wilson, "Ms. Marvel #1," *Ms. Marvel*, Feb. 2014, n.p.

it out after realizing there's alcohol in her cup. She quickly realizes that her classmates don't see her as one of them just for having shown up at the party.<sup>86</sup>

When she leaves the party, a mysterious fog rolls over Jersey City, which causes Kamala to hallucinate that her most respected heroes – including Carol Danvers, who is now Captain Marvel – are there in front of her. Captain America confronts Kamala with the following query:



Figure 8: MM#1 (Feb. 2014).

This is an enormously important realization for Kamala to have – rejecting her family's culture and religion wasn't going to make her classmates accept her. But when Captain Marvel asks Kamala what she wants, Kamala responds, "I want to be you."<sup>87</sup> Surely, being a tall blonde woman would make it easier to fit in. But little did Kamala realize that she would literally be made into Carol Danvers. In the image to the right, we see Kamala Khan, transformed into the

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

1978 version of Carol Danvers.<sup>88</sup> But in addition to that, we see a de-sexualized version of Carol Danvers. Yes, she's wearing a sexy superheroine costume, but Kamala is so awkward and uncomfortable that there's nothing especially sexy about it. Her feet are turned inwards, as if she isn't quite sure how to stand, and she's looking at her gloved hand, asking "Is it too late to change my mind?"<sup>89</sup>

The first few times Kamala saves anyone, she does so as Carol Danvers. This indicates that she doesn't see *herself* as a superhero, but rather sees herself as impersonating Carol Danvers as a superhero. She eventually learns that, although she has the ability to heal herself at superhuman rates, the more she heals, the less she can shapeshift. This forces her to be Kamala *and* Ms. Marvel at the same time, which (at least in the comics I had access to) Carol Danvers wasn't able to do in her solo series. Once she starts fighting crime in her own body and not Carol's, Kamala even makes a costume that pays homage to her culture. She customizes a burkini (a burka/bikini), which is a type of full-coverage swimwear that's popular in Muslim countries .

Kamala has to figure out who she is, but there's no memory loss or blacking out—there's not a lot of room for questions of ambivalence, consent, or whether or not Kamala is empowered. She doesn't ask for her powers, but she makes the choice to learn to use them. She is given the tools to become empowered, and has the agency to use them – even if it takes practice, and the realization that Ms. Marvel doesn't have to be Carol Danvers.



Figure 9: MM#1 (Feb. 2014).

<sup>88</sup>This costume was introduced in *MM#20*, just three issues before Carol's solo series got cancelled.

<sup>89</sup> *MM#1*.



### Relationship to Religion

It would have been all too easy for a writer to have a teenage girl find strength by breaking away from her family's traditions completely, and to reject a religion that isn't practiced by most Americans. Kamala is still trying to figure out how she, as a Pakistani Muslim, fits into a mostly-Christian United States, but Islam is a source of personal strength for Kamala. Furthermore, the comics make clear that Kamala's experience with Islam as an American is not the only one portrayed. This multiplicity of experiences – those of her parents, brother, and friend – are an important way that the comic discourages ambivalence; there are multiple experiences, and multiple ways to read those experiences, but the text doesn't invite any simultaneous contradictory readings.

Kamala's moral code doesn't come from a dying relative's last words (like Spider-Man's) or from a national creed (like Captain America's), but rather from a religion that most Americans know very little about. The choice to make religion the source of Kamala's morality was an active decision on the part of G. Willow Wilson. In an interview with BleedingCool.com in 2014, Wilson was asked whether or not "Kamala's moral code drive[s] her in any different directions than Spider-Man's might, because it is explicitly religious."<sup>91</sup> That is, is a Muslim sense of morality different from a secular American one? Wilson says it isn't.

Ethically, religions are kind of a wash. Don't cheat, don't lie, don't steal, look out for those who are less fortunate—there's a lot of agreement there across doctrinal lines. Not absolute agreement, but a lot of agreement... I think that's why superheroes resonate across cultural and religious boundaries...they are expressions of our ethical selves, not our sectarian selves. So there is a lot of overlap between Kamala's concept of right and wrong and Spider-Man's. They have much more in common than not... You can find some implicit or explicit variation of "With great power comes great responsibility" [Spider-Man's motto] in the Talmud, the Bible, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Quran, and

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<sup>91</sup> G. Willow Wilson, interview by Hannah Means Shannon, "'Can You Make Sure There's Nothing Un-Islamic In Our Oriental Shlock-Fest?' – G. Willow Wilson In The Bleeding Cool," May 8, 2014, accessed Nov. 16, 2015. Interview <http://www.bleedingcool.com/2014/05/08/can-you-make-sure-theres-nothing-un-islamic-in-our-oriental-shlock-fest-g-willow-wilson-in-the-bleeding-cool-interview/>

probably just about every other text out there that addresses human ethics. It was not hard to make that parallel.

In other words, morality and ethics are universal concepts. A Muslim sense of morality may have its roots in the Quran, but the same themes can be found in texts across cultures. There may be an argument to be made that this is assimilationist, but I would argue that any story that's popular in the mainstream is assimilationist, and that normalizing something like Islam, which is the world's fastest-growing religion and is practiced by a quarter of the world's population<sup>92</sup> (and is, therefore normal) is a good thing. *Ms. Marvel* doesn't seek to Christianize, Westernize, or Orientalize Islam; it merely seeks to show that a Muslim sense of morality is, at its core, the same kind of morality offered by any other religion or philosophy.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050," *Pew Research Center*, April 2, 2015, accessed Nov. 29, 2015. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>.

<sup>93</sup> It also isn't as if religion and superheroes don't go way back. For example, the first-ever superhero, Superman, was created by two Jewish Americans. Superman's origin story, which involves him being sent to Earth in a capsule by his parents on the planet Krypton, can be read as having been influenced by the story of Moses from the Hebrew Bible.

In the panel below, Kamala is faced with her first opportunity to save someone after getting her powers. Her classmate Zoe has fallen into the water after a night spent partying and drinking. Kamala rises to the occasion and saves the day, but she is able to do so because she can draw strength from her religion.

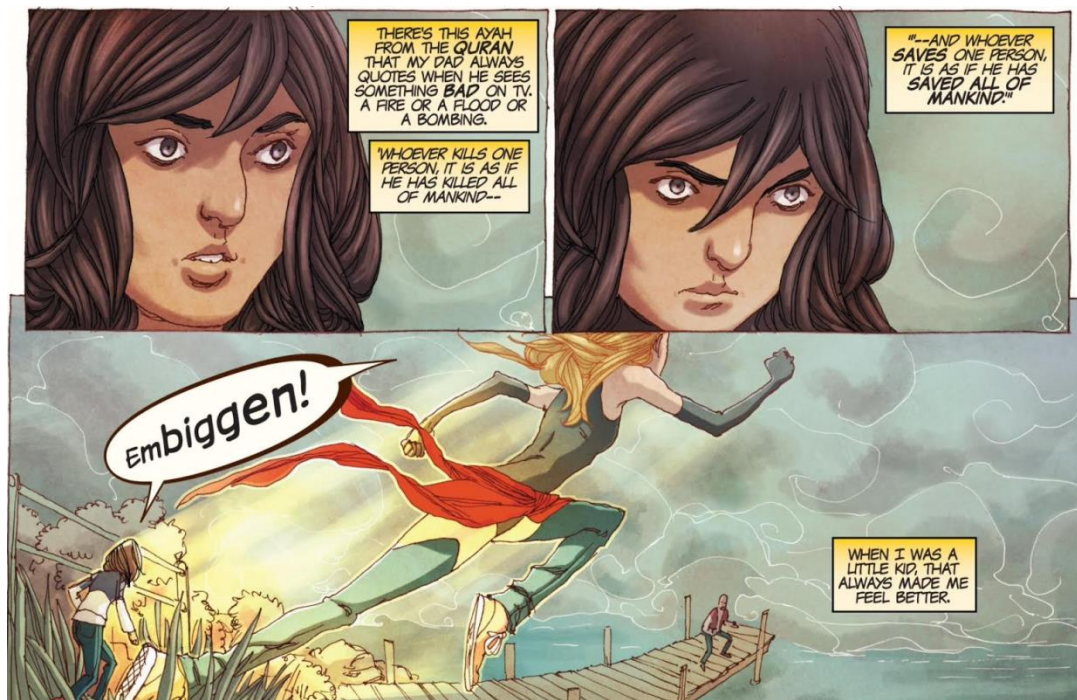


Figure 10: MM#1 (Feb. 2014).

In essence, “whoever saves one person... has saved all of mankind,” is saying that whoever has the power to save a life has the responsibility to act, since one life is as important as humanity as a whole. The parallel to Spider-Man’s “with great power comes great responsibility” is an easy jump to make.

This is an important message to send to readers who don’t know anything about Islam. Most readers will recognize this verse in some form or another, whether that be through the parallel to Spider-Man’s moral code, or a similar quote from a different religious text. A very similar verse appears in the Palestinian Talmud, a Jewish text: "Whoever destroys a soul, it is

considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world."<sup>94</sup>

Even though the series invokes Muslim-based morality (specifically that which is shared with other religious traditions), it shies away from falling back on stereotypes by illustrating the multiplicity of a “Muslim” identity. Kamala is a teenager who, though she does draw strength from her religion, spends more of her time writing *Avengers* fanfiction than studying the Quran, and pushes back against the expectations of her imam if she thinks they’re unreasonable.<sup>96</sup> But her experience is not the only one the reader gets to see.

Kamala’s family represent what might be characterized as an “old world” perspective. After all, Kamala’s parents are immigrants, who moved to New Jersey from Karachi in order to give their children “a better life.”<sup>97</sup> They are very protective of their daughter, and they do have different expectations for her than they have for her brother. Kamala’s brother Aamir is probably the most religious character in the series. He wears traditional Muslim dress and most of what he says to Kamala involves religious advice. In this sense, they represent a sort of traditionalist culture, which could be critiqued as stereotypical, although it could also be defended as representing some first-generation immigrant expectations.

There’s also her friend Nakia, who represents a different type of young Muslim American than Kamala does. She wears a hijab against her father’s wishes<sup>102</sup> and has no interest in going to the party Zoe and Chad invite her and Kamala to in the first issue. She also has no interest in

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<sup>94</sup> Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 4:1 (22a).

<sup>96</sup> In MM#3, there’s a scene where Kamala is talking to her friend Nakia while they’re at a service at their mosque. Men and women are divided by a partition, which means that the imam can’t see them, but he hears them and tells them to stop talking. Kamala responds, “S-sorry, Sheikh Abdullah, but it’s really hard to concentrate when we can’t even see you.”

<sup>97</sup> G. Willow Wilson, “Ms. Marvel #2,” *Ms. Marvel*, March, 2014.

<sup>102</sup> MM#1.

having an Americanized nickname – when Zoe calls her “Kiki,” she corrects her: “Nakia.”<sup>103</sup>

Where Kamala has an interest in some level of assimilation into American culture, Nakia does not, and nothing in the text encourages the reader to think less of her for it.

Nakia’s decision to wear a hijab not only opens up a popular discussion about Muslim



Figure 11: MM#1 (Feb. 2014).

women, but potentially about the way American culture thinks about clothing. Nakia makes it clear that her decision to wear a headscarf is her own decision, even though she has to deal with racist comments [see image]. The interaction depicted in this panel between Nakia and Zoe illustrates a very real tension between western feminism and female Muslim dress. As Homa Hoodfar writes in “The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads,”

The stereotypes of Muslim women are so deep-rooted and strong that even those who are very conscious and critical of not only blatant racism but of its more manifestations in everyday life do not successfully avoid them. To the Western feminist eye, the image of the veiled woman obscures all else.<sup>104</sup>

Zoe is clearly guilty of this kind of well-intentioned racism, which is committed by people who are otherwise aware of what kinds of comments constitute racism. Because Nakia’s hair is covered, Zoe assumes that she’s somehow oppressed. But Nakia, like many Muslims living in the West, seems to have “taken up the veil not only from personal conviction, but to assert the identity and existence of a confident Muslim community and to demand fuller social and political recognition.”<sup>105</sup> Nakia’s presence in the comic, especially in contrast with Zoe’s, invites readers to look at the ambivalence that they themselves might feel towards veils in real life,

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Homa Hoodfar, “The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads,” in *Religion 204 Reader*, ed. Greta Austin, 2015, 247.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 248.

which non-Muslims might read as both oppressive (when forced upon the wearer) and progressive (when worn as an expression of one's identity).

By portraying a multiplicity of Muslim identities in addition to Kamala's, *Ms. Marvel* does not invite ambivalent readings of Muslims. Instead, it offers portrayals of multiple identities that all fall under the identifier of "Muslim," but no two characters share the same mold. In doing so, the series instead invites the reader to examine their own biases and ambivalences towards Muslims in real life.

### **Conclusion**

*Ms. Marvel* and *Ms. Marvel* are two completely different series. They may share a title, both feature female protagonists, and draw inspiration from their contemporary feminist movements, but aside from that, they are remarkably different. If they didn't have the same title, I probably would have never considered comparing them (though that may be a sign of my own non-creativity).

The 1970s series is obviously a product of its time, but I said in the introduction, it wasn't even terribly feminist for the time it was written. The ambivalent attitude the series takes towards feminism is really telling of how difficult it is to pin down what is "feminist" and what isn't, especially looking at a historical popular source. The creator, Gerry Conway, had good intentions, and seems to have genuinely wanted to promote feminism. *But*, in putting himself (and a bunch of other men in the industry) in charge of producing a "feminist" comic, he did nothing to change the "boys club" of the comics industry. Ms. Marvel's costume makes her seem like a male-targeted pinup, *but* clothing has long been a source of empowerment. Carol Danvers is a hardnosed working woman who knows her professional value, *but* the way she's drawn sometimes undermines the effect of her words. Carol Danvers was subjected to a rape storyline,

*but* the writers at Marvel confronted those implications head on, rather than pretending it didn't happen. It's all of these "buts" that indicate that the 1977 *Ms. Marvel* was definitely an ambivalent text.

The 2014 run of *Ms. Marvel* is also a product of its time, which is a more socially-conscious time than the 1970s were. The series is written by a Muslim American woman who came to Islam as an outsider, and therefore knows how to make Muslim themes accessible to non-Muslims. Kamala Khan is an interesting, nuanced person who is not burdened with being the sole representative of her culture in the series. In doing so, the series pushes back ambivalent readings of the texts and encourages readers to examine their own ambivalence.

It is important to study popular culture, especially over a series of time, because it is so indicative of the time in which it was produced. Academics are only now starting to not turn their noses up at "pop culture," I think because they're starting to realize that popular culture *is* culture, and it is important to use popular sources when trying to discern what a culture was like as a whole. In comparing these two *Ms. Marvel* series, what stands out most is how different women were portrayed in 1977 as opposed to 2014. It looks like society, or at least the comic book industry, has made progress in its attitudes towards women. Carol Danvers was a male fantasy. Kamala Khan is a person. The feminist struggle still isn't over, but look how far we've come, and look at the popular culture that's now on our side.